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# Exploring Muslim Diaspora Communities in Europe through a Social Movement Lens: Some Initial Thoughts; Strategic Insights, v. 6, issue 5 (May 2005)



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## Exploring Muslim Diaspora Communities in Europe through a Social Movement Lens: Some Initial Thoughts

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 5 (May 2005)

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### Introduction<sup>[1]</sup>

Sparked at least partially by suggestions that technological advances have created an age of civilization in which information will play a dominant role in forms of human societal organizing<sup>[2]</sup> and enabled through advances in network analysis<sup>[3]</sup>, some of the more interesting literature to emerge recently on conflict has recognized and explored the role of *networks*.<sup>[4]</sup> In this work, it is argued that the evolving information age empowers networks as an organizational form<sup>[6]</sup> that can execute collective actions. Networks can thus emerge as system-challenging actors in the context of contemporary conflict.

In simple terms, social movements can be described as individuals, groups, and organizations connected via internal and external networks that challenge the system in which they are situated—usually within the context of political governance and/or societal organizing. In short, social movements represent an amalgamation of loosely or tightly coupled networks of system-challenging actors. Similarly, diaspora communities are sometimes described as individuals, groups, and organizations linked through tightly or loosely coupled networks and bonded via language, shared history, ritual, collective norms, and similar cultural artifacts. Thus, social movements can be described as system-challenging networks, and diasporas can be described as networks that, among a host of other activities, sometimes execute system-challenging behavior. Leveraging social movement theory (SMT) to explore the phenomenon of diasporic collective contentious action, then, seems to make intuitive sense. Specifically, synthesizing SMT with emerging research on Muslim diaspora communities in Europe is interesting due to growing evidence that European communities have been unable (or perhaps unwilling) to sufficiently respond to expectations of its Muslim citizens and immigrants, specifically as related to widespread acceptance of Islamic societal institutions.

This paper makes two claims. First, it suggests that through such a synthesis, studying system-challenging behavior by Muslim diaspora communities within Europe reveals that five other types of collective actions are often coincident with system-challenging actions: 1) disassociation, 2) withdrawal, 3) linkage, 4) co-option, and 5) creation of parallel structures, which can be interpreted as a hybridization of the other actions. Second, this paper suggests that such displays

of collective contentious behavior may, under certain conditions, indicate the emergence of a pan-ethnic Islamic identity. In turn, this pan-ethnic Islamic identity affects how Muslim diaspora communities in Europe interact with host institutions, changing the scope, focus, and expected outcomes of this interaction.

## Diaspora

Discussion of issues such as social movements and diaspora is complicated from the outset due to the lack of consensus on definitions and ideal types. In particular, that which constitutes a diaspora is hotly debated.[6] Further, while McAdam et al's synthesis of political opportunity, framing processes, and mobilizing structures is offered as a unifying framework through which social movements can be studied,[7] much is still unknown about these highly dynamic and interactive phenomena. This paper is based on an understanding of social movements as a series of contentious collective actions of an overtly political nature by individuals, groups, and organizations seeking or repelling some type of reform within a system of political governance, as well as the structure, agency, and interactions that enable these actions to occur.[8] In other words, social movements consist of a series of events in which system-challenging actors, bystanders, and authority figures interact in order to institute or repel some type of political or societal change.

Prior to 1990, the study of diaspora communities was dominated by the examination of forced migration of Jews, Greeks, Armenians, and Africans,[9] with sporadic exceptions to include the study of uprooted Palestinians[10] as well as Puerto Ricans emigrating to the United States[11]. In the past fifteen years, however, inquiry into diaspora communities has exploded, perhaps out of recognition that the concerns of diasporic networks have become increasingly prominent in the unfolding of national and international politics[12] or simply out of recognition that diasporic terminology applies beyond the narrow context of ethnic Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Africans, and Puerto Ricans. As early as 1995, scholars began to discuss the possibility of whether a Muslim diaspora existed within Europe,[13] while other scholars attempted to establish broad-based typologies of diaspora communities.[14]

Who are the Muslim diaspora within Europe? As consensus on the term diaspora community has yet to be reached, an attempt to bound diaspora analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. Clearly, however, researchers have begun to study these communities, sometimes bounding the analysis through ethnicity, sometimes through the borders or enclaves of the adopted country, sometimes through religious sect, or sometimes all three. Examples include ethnographic study of ethnic Turks in Germany[15] and Bulgaria,[16] ethnic Pakistanis in the United Kingdom,[17] ethnic Maghrebi in France,[18] and journalistic, comparative inquiry into Muslims in various European countries.[19] Other research has focused on hypothesis testing of dominant theories regarding the meaning of citizenship in an increasingly globalized society,[20] comparative study of assimilation and integration of Muslim minorities to historical parallels,[21] exploring the range of host nation attitudes toward Muslim immigrants,[22] Islam's role in building community and collective identity,[23] diffusion of Islamic thinking and interpretation between Europe, North America, the Middle East and South Asia through the writings of Islamic scholars,[24] and differences in integration of Muslim minorities in the Netherlands from juridical and socioeconomic perspectives.[25] From this body of work, it seems clear that the Islamic diaspora in Europe is diverse, growing, and replete with issues and concerns affecting any other cross-sectional slice of contemporary society, such as inter-generational conflict, ensuring physical and financial security, and interpreting appropriate individual actions within the context of a moral life.

## SMT: A Context For Studying Diaspora

Given the conflicting, evolutionary nature of social movement theory and the loosely-worded terminology of diaspora studies, why try to synthesize them? First and foremost, by straddling

micro (such as individuals and their recruitment into social movement organizations) and macro (such as state interaction with multiple cooperative and competitive social movement organizations) levels of analysis, social movement research offers the potential of investigation at a mesolevel of analysis[26]—i.e., a level residing between small group dynamics and movement historiography. Such a level of analysis offers insight into *inter-group* decision-making and behaviors, which in Gerhards and Rucht's analysis of mesomobilization,[28] translates into pan-group mobilizing and organizing. A cursory review of diaspora communities, particularly diaspora communities from predominantly Muslim countries located within Europe, reveals that many such communities include networks of individual, group, and organizational actors; studying them at the mesolevel of analysis, then, seems intuitively fruitful to describing, explaining, and understanding the dynamics of diaspora-host contention.

Second, social movement theory offers insights grounded in explorations of human collective behavior that for the most part, is goal-oriented, seeking to address a grievance that may be clearly articulated or shrouded in more generalized rhetoric and discourse. In interactions with host institutions, many diaspora communities demonstrate goal-oriented action that is indicative of a greater social concern. For example, creation of kindergartens more closely aligned with Islam in Germany[28] offers an indication that German society—at a macro level—is not adapting or responding to the Islamic mores of some diaspora communities within its borders. Thus the intersection of the two fields of research promise to inform each other, and perhaps a synergy created through their synthesis will yield new, innovative, and interesting interpretations of sub-state and trans-state conflict.

What, then, emerges through a review of available research on Muslim diaspora communities in Europe through a SMT lens? Offering these thoughts merely in the context of an initial study, I suggest that three observations are particularly interesting: evidence of co-incident behaviors executed in tandem with system-challenging behaviors, the rise of parallel institutions, and instances of organizing and mobilizing based on a pan-ethnic Islamic identity.

## Co-incident Behaviors & Parallel Institutions

Descriptions of diaspora community behavior, considered as a collective set of group actions, indicate that in addition to system-challenging actions, diaspora communities' interactions with host-country institutions can be placed into five general categories:

1. Disengagement or disassociation;
2. Withdrawal;
3. Linkage;
4. Co-option; and
5. Creation of parallel institutions.

*Disengagement or disassociation* refers to a lack of interaction that is neither purposively evasive nor consciously considered; it likely stems from subtleties, opportunities and norms existing within the environment that result in conditioned behavior toward choosing, for example, this store over another or toward pursuing this friendship and not that one. In a sense, norms of disengagement could both pre-exist in the environment and then perpetuate through normative adherence. Although pin-pointing a single cause for disengagement would prove unlikely, reasonable explanations would include a lack of integration between host and diaspora communities, lack of acceptance of diaspora members and norms within the host country (such as demonstrations of explicit and implicit racism), and lack of opportunities for integration and acceptance to occur. One could also expect that gains made in understanding in/out-group dynamics would prove relevant to exploring this phenomenon of disengagement.

In contrast, *withdrawal* consists of a lack of interaction between the diaspora community and host institutions that is purposefully or consciously evasive following some period when interaction did occur. Withdrawal represents behavior that can exist only if the diaspora communities and institutions of the host country were once linked, either permanently or temporarily, through deliberate or random meetings. Like disengagement, withdrawal could result from any number of reasons, from failures to meet expectations to inadequacies in the services provided by the linkage to normative conditioning.

*Linkage* consists of attempts of diaspora communities to link to existing host-country institutions—such as actions to initiate discourse between disparate host and diasporic groups, request assistance or rightful benefits from local government, or encourage information or resource-sharing with or from institutions within the host country. In his discussion of linkages between Christian and Muslim groups in Germany, Jonken describes that frustrations emerged out of differing expectations for such linkages; in many cases, Christian groups viewed the interactions as opportunities for education and dialogue, while participating Muslim groups and/or individuals expected concrete assistance to result. Attempts at linkage, then, are likely dependent upon the level of overlap between expectations and outcomes by the participating host institutions and diasporic groups.

*Co-option* occurs when a diaspora community is able to leverage host institutions in such a manner that the institutions can (and do) adequately represent and lobby for diaspora community concerns. Examples might include the use of state funds for schools administered by religious groups, use of the courts and other artifacts of the legal system to force employers to honor times or days of worship or coverage of diaspora issues by host-country media. *Challenge*, on the other hand, represents interactions in which a diaspora community or its representatives openly confront a host institution about any variety of issues, such as discrimination, cultural insensitivity, inadequacy of services, poor policy, poor implementation of policy, and similar items. Examples might include worker strikes or non-violent protest and most closely align with what would be traditionally considered as system-challenging actions.

Finally, *creation of parallel institutions* refers to diaspora action in which structures such as schools, houses of worship, banking relationships, and so on, are eschewed in favor of institutions performing similar functions indigenous to the diaspora community. Such phenomena perhaps represents a hybridization of withdrawal and challenge, as the diaspora community withdraws from host institutions due to inadequacy in meeting their needs, then creates structures that form a de facto challenge to such institutions through replication of their functions.<sup>[29]</sup> In a sense, the creation of parallel institutions establishes distinct community structures that co-exist within the same geographic space, but do not generally interact with regularity. Residents of the “home” country are served by existing institutions. However, members of diaspora communities might be served by alternate institutions that are more accommodating to their needs.

## Islamic Identity

A significant portion of the literature related to diaspora communities from predominantly Muslim countries situated within Europe focuses on identity and its various substrata: personal identity, group identity, national identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, and so on. Leveau suggests that Islam represents an important collective behavior (and one would add, belief structure) among migrants to Europe since the 1970s, while Cameron suggests that among young Muslims in Europe, identification with Islam may be felt more strongly than identification with a particular ethnic heritage.<sup>[30]</sup> The emergence of a strong *Islamic identity* among Muslims in Europe, particularly an Islamic identity that is independent of affiliation with a particular ethnic group, leads to interesting possibilities for pan-ethnic, and perhaps even pan-sect, mobilizing and organizing. The desire to live in accordance with Islamic principles may emerge as a central, *unifying* commonality among the participants. In such environments, *Islamic activism* becomes possible. Under certain conditions, then, civic-minded organizations and social clubs may no longer need

to be centered on ethnic lines within a geographic enclave, such as Pakistanis in Manchester or Turks in Munich, but may instead organize, recruit, and mobilize along religious, pan-ethnic commonalities. In this scenario, Islam, not ethnicity, becomes a unifying force through which collective action is forged.

Indeed, Mandaville and Werbner suggest that pan-ethnic Muslim identity is part of the fabric of Muslim diaspora life within Europe[31]. In her study of ethnic Pakistani Muslims in Great Britain, Werbner contends that while British Pakistanis remain committed to issues in Pakistan:

...at the same time [British] Pakistanis have also redefined themselves as a *Muslim* diaspora....To invest a Muslim diaspora against the grain has entailed for British Pakistanis a refocusing on the Islamic peripheries—on minority Muslim communities, often persecuted and displaced, beyond the Islamic heartland. Hence, Pakistanis in Britain have rediscovered their connection to Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir. In their fund-raising efforts they work with major Muslim transnational non-governmental organisations... Being a *Muslim* diasporan does not entail an imperative of physical return to a lost homeland. It enables Pakistanis to foster and yet defer indefinitely the fulfillment of the myth of their return back home, while asserting their present responsibility for fellow diasporan Muslims—their membership is a transnational moral religious community, the *umma*. The Muslim diaspora opens up a diasporic space of critical dissent against leaders everywhere: the Arab world, Pakistan, and the West...[32]

In short, collective identity, at least for Pakistani Muslims, exists not only in the form of a Pakistani heritage, ties, and cultural traditions, but also as members of a broader community of Muslims across the globe, with particular emphasis placed on supporting marginalized Muslims. Similarly, Mandaville suggests that Muslim youth growing up in Europe may feel more affinity toward the Palestinian cause than their migrant parents. From a social movement perspective, we should expect that pan-ethnic organizing and mobilizing is entirely possible—and perhaps to be expected—among Muslim diaspora communities when the grievance is associated with a marginalized Muslim group outside the “home” country. In other words, we should expect that the grievance leading to mobilization *will not necessarily* be one to which those mobilizing are connected via familial or ethnic obligation or linkage, but rather that such mobilizing—*when representing an outgrowth of one’s Islamic identity*—may center on issues of marginalized Muslim groups (or more broadly, a perception of Islam itself as marginalized) beyond either the host or home countries. In such cases, one’s Islamic identity could then become a central feature of organizing for contentious collective action. This possibility deserves greater study.

If, indeed, a pan-ethnic Islamic identity is emerging upon Muslim diaspora groups in Europe, what are some of the phenomena that might be contributing to or accompanying its emergence? Four trends seem particularly notable in terms of their exploratory and explanatory power.

### 1. Inter-generational gap

Mandaville suggests that an intergenerational gap exists between foreign-born parents and host-country-born youth in which Islam and its role in individual life is not only interpreted differently, but moreover, concerns about injustice and fairness are focused on entirely different locales, with parents focused on “home” and youth focused on “host.”[33] According to Mandaville, some European Muslim youth express disappointment that their parents know the intricacies of political issues in a home country, such as Pakistan, but have little interest in engaging in political issues in the neighborhoods in which they reside. Indeed, two factors appear critically important to understanding inter-generational gaps within Muslim diaspora communities: age and the location in which one primarily spent one’s youth. First-generation diaspora, it seems, may have closer ties to “home” country issues, while younger second-generation diaspora, or diaspora members who have spent the bulk of their youth in the “host” country, may have closer ties to local issues. Fewer ties to the “home” country may result in formation of identities among younger diaspora

members that center upon the common experience of Muslim belief and practice, enabling greater opportunities for the emergence of pan-ethnic Islamic identity.

## 2. Pride in “otherness”

Haller suggests that within the context of identity, two “master emotions” predominate: pride and shame.<sup>[34]</sup> How might these master emotions play out in the context Muslim diaspora in Europe? Although anecdotal, White’s research highlighted a phenomenon among Turkish street gangs to so absorb the identity of otherness such that the derogatory term *Barbaren*, used by some Germans to denote foreigners, was turned to a source of power when it was selected as name for a street gang of ethnic Turkish youth. In this twist, a label of shame becomes a label of pride and a means of challenging a culture that is unaccepting of at least some ethnic Turk versions of German residency. From a social movement perspective, this transitioning of the term *Barbaren* from a source of shame to a manifestation of pride parallels similar appropriation of derogatory terms and symbols by other groups participating in social movements, such as the gay/lesbian movement’s appropriation of the Nazi-era pink triangle as its own. *Barbaren* may seem a derogatory and exclusionary term for some, but for those involved in the street gang and with significant likelihood, close associates of gang members, the term *Barbaren* now connotes power, inclusiveness, and acceptance—perhaps even a sense of invincibility and righteousness. In societies dominated by Christian religious institutions that simultaneously view Islamic life as a foreign “otherness,” this self v. other phenomenon could easily contribute to pan-ethnic Islamic identity as a mechanism for solidarity, hope, pride, and perhaps even survival. Polarization, in other words, may lead to development of more intense identification with Islamic mores.

## 3. Forced acceptance

Further, Mandaville contends that for some Muslim youth in Europe, lack of acceptance and integration leads some to reject Islam as a vestige of the past, while others embrace Islam as a re-affirmation of identity and heritage. Among the latter youth, some seek to demonstrate this identity in avowedly public and vocal ways.<sup>[35]</sup> In some respects—particularly when demonstrations are aimed at consciously challenging a prevailing view among non-Muslims in the host nation—this vocalism represents a forcing function, a forced acceptance of tolerance, dignity, and rights not only to exist, but to live openly and without retribution in accordance with one’s religion and culture. From a social movement perspective, such attitudes are critical factors in generating energy for mobilization; if one is not frustrated by a particular grievance of perceived injustice, or if one feels that societal institutions are generally meeting one’s needs, a key element of mobilization is lost. Individual recognition of a lack of one’s acceptance within host institutions, coupled with a willingness to consciously challenge this lack of acceptance, can serve as catalysts for the organization and mobilization that could lead to greater public outcry—both building and reinforcing a stronger sense of Islamic identity that transcends ethnic boundaries.

## 4. Overlap

A final aspect of identity emerges from available literature on Muslim diaspora communities in Europe. Specifically, despite comprehension that personal identity is often an overlapping (sometimes incongruous) litany of choices and associations, in many cases, *one is generally not forced to live within the singular context of one particular identity*. Different aspects of one’s identity, although always intrinsic to one’s self-perception, can dominate in particular situations; one chooses which parts of one’s identity to emphasize with others and at which times to do so. Sometimes the choice is reactionary, sometimes instrumental, and sometimes, a matter of chance events. For members of Muslim diaspora communities in Europe, the situation is no different—certain aspects of self-identity dominate sometimes, other aspects dominate at others. Thus it is entirely possible for self-identity to simultaneously include *both* one’s ethnic heritage and one’s religion, and indeed, for both relationships to present themselves simultaneously in the tacit and explicit expression of identity. Ethnic identity and religious identity are generally not

dissonant; even if they were, only rarely, if ever, might an individual be forced to choose between them.

## Conclusion

Understanding identity issues within Muslim diaspora communities requires levels of analysis at pan-ethnic, generational, in/out group, and individual levels. Further, diaspora communities may elect to direct support toward marginalized Muslim groups that receive less attention from counterparts in one's home country, creating, in a sense, a pan-Islamic identity, or at least a sense of responsibility for other Muslim groups that is less likely in the "home" country. As a result, community identity for Muslim diaspora in Europe includes both ethnic identity through linkages to the "home" country and pan-ethnic identity through concern for other Muslims. Groups, including gangs, may form out of taking pride in "otherness," absorbing symbols of non-acceptance and perhaps making collective attempts at forcing acceptance of identity. This forced acceptance of identity, however, also exists at the individual level, as evidenced through some Muslim youth articulating in outwardly demonstrable manners that they have explicitly *chosen* and *are proud of* their identity. For social movement researchers interested in the Islamic diaspora, understanding how these overlapping self-identities coincide and contribute to community or collective identities is a critical task.

Further, when diaspora communities demonstrate system-challenging actions, five other types of behavior also are often co-incident: 1) disassociation, 2) withdrawal, 3) linkage, 4) co-option, and 5) creation of parallel structures. Of these behaviors, creation of parallel structures is particularly interesting in a social movement context, as the structures represent a *de facto* challenge to host-country institutions and in effect, create distinct, but parallel, communities within the same relative geographic space. Existence of these parallel but distinct communities may have the effect of reinforcing identities forged from viewing host-diasporic interactions in "self vs. other" terms. As such distinctions become more dominant, both individually and societally, those intending to integrate diaspora members into existing host-country communities may find it difficult to overcome trends toward separation and distinction, particularly when such trends were borne out of necessity or exclusion

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